



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Three Insights About Change

by Terry Little

Recently, I changed jobs. I moved from Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, where I had worked for 30 years managing programs, to a newly created job in Washington, D.C. as the Director of the Air Force Acquisition Center of Excellence (whatever that means!). This experience has led me to reflect some on job changes and how to adapt to them.

Insight #1

My first insight is that I have had to restart the process of developing my credibility. While I am well known within the Air Force as a program manager and, hopefully, a capable one, it is clear to me that I have to re-establish my credibility in this new job. In other words, I cannot live on my past laurels. How do I get people to listen to what I have to say? More importantly, how do I get them to act based upon what I have to say?

Certainly neither my position nor rank is very helpful in my new role. Lots of people at the Headquarters have high-sounding positions and high grades, but don't deliver anything other than words of caution or dissent. Many view their roles as keeping something bad from happening rather than helping make something good happen. These folks have no credibility and the system merely tolerates them.

I have to prove that I can be effective here--effective not just in generating new ideas, but also in making them bear fruit. That's tough. It demands that I don't promise more than I can deliver which, in turn, infers that I should know reasonably well what I can deliver. Right now, I don't know because a lot of it depends upon my ability to persuade people to my way of thinking. I do have some confidence in my ability to persuade, but I know that results will hinge on my skill in getting people to buy into my agenda for change and to accept accountability for it. As a program manager, I never had that challenge. I had (or took) lots of authority to act unilaterally and my goals seemed clear. Now I have come to understand how fragile credibility is and that establishing and maintaining it is continuous.

Insight #2

My second insight has come from pondering over the answer I give when people ask me how the new job is going. My stock answer is that "It's too soon to tell." The real answer is "I don't know." The reason is that I still haven't grasped what constitutes success in this new job. Is it as simple as making my bosses happy? How about pleasing my customers--program managers and industry partners?

FEATURES: TERRY LITTLE

Three Insights About Change (cont'd)

I am not comfortable with these measures because they imply that making people happy or comfortable is equivalent to doing the right thing. My experience tells me otherwise. Approval-seeking behaviors virtually always produce bad results both because (1) we never really know what will make others happy and (2) making others happy often hinges on telling them what they want or expect to hear. I am still working on this one and am fairly certain that there is no easy metric for this.

Insight #3

Third, I am finding to my surprise that my experience as a program manager is, on balance, a liability in my new job. The problem is my unconscious reliance on that experience to know what is right without taking into account that every situation is different. No matter how well intended, one-size-fits-all approaches never work. The reasons are simple. Every situation is unique and thus demands different approaches--different than what may have worked in the past for me or for others. More importantly, I know the key to success is implementation, not strategy or approach. There are plenty of OK approaches to every problem, but the best one will always be the one that someone can implement well.

For example, one of my first tasks in the new job was to totally rewrite the Air Force's instruction for managing acquisition programs, starting with a clean sheet of paper. I wrote the instruction based upon what I thought would be some guiding principles for an empowered manager; it contained no long list of "how-to" instructions. To my dismay, many in the field have been critical of the instruction because they don't know how to translate guiding principles into action. They want more detailed guidance. What I concluded was that I wrote the instruction as one that I would want and didn't consider that most managers in our system view lack of guidance as a problem and not an opportunity. That's something I mean to change, but it hasn't happened yet. My experience played too dominant a role in my thinking.

Finally, I have already confirmed what I previously thought. This change is healthy for me. It has re-ignited my passion and given me a new challenge that I never would have had where I was. Admittedly it is uncomfortable, but it is also exciting in a way that my previous job was not. I had done it so long that my zest and sense of vitality were gone. In short, I was bored and didn't even realize it. Three cheers for change!!!

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